

SEATTLE DOWNTOWN PARKS AND PUBLIC SPACES TASK FORCE

TASK FORCE MEETING #4 SUMMARY: MAY 6, 2005

Task Force Members

Ken Bounds, Co-chair
Kate Joncas, Co-chair
Catherine Stanford, Co-chair
Tina Bueche
Jordan Royer
David Brewster
Ron Sher (absent)

Parks & Rec/MID Staff

B. J. Brooks
Eric Friedli
Christopher Williams
Stephanie Jones
Antoinette Daniel
Dewey Potter
Anita Woo
Peggy Emerson

Consultants

Bonnie Berk
Michael Regnier

Welcome and Announcements

Ken opened the meeting by giving an overview of the week's events: Parks briefed the Pioneer Square Preservation Board on the Occidental Park Plan, and the Board approved the plan; Parks continues to work with the Freeway Park Association; and Parks briefed the City Council on planning for central waterfront public space from Pier 57 to 62/62.

Key Issue #1: Parks Maintenance Issues

Christopher Williams led a discussion of key parks maintenance issues and potential strategies. Regarding routine maintenance, he noted that:

- Community expectations for cleanliness/aesthetic appearance are not consistently met
- Frequency of cleaning may not be sufficient (e.g., litter pickup and trash removal)
- Repairs may not be completed as promptly as desired
- Deep cleaning (pressure washing) may not occur as frequently as desired
- Some inefficiencies exist regarding coordination of maintenance by multiple City agencies, including Parks; SDOT and SPU; and inefficiencies exist in the City coordinating with non-City jurisdictions, including the Port, WSDOT and private partners, such as "Friends of" groups, businesses, and neighborhood groups.

Potential strategies to address these challenges include:

- Identifying deficiencies in basic maintenance services necessary to meet community expectations requires clarifying community expectations, and providing information to stakeholders on the standard or level of maintenance the City provides for downtown parks and public spaces.
- Identify partnership opportunities to enhance the base services provided by the City to achieve goals set for downtown parks and public spaces.
- Involve public in actions to keep parks and public spaces cleaner.
- Develop a multi-departmental coordinated plan for efficient delivery of City services to enhance maintenance with existing resources.
- Develop an annual list of minor modifications and a replacement plan for landscaping, hardscape, and amenities for Parks and the City's public spaces; incorporate it into the annual operating budget.

Recommended next steps to address current challenges include:

- Parks, SPU and WSDOT develop documents on service standards provided in Downtown Parks and Public Spaces.
- Develop a document of private partners currently operating and maintaining public spaces.

- Identify enhancements, and develop a list of potential partners to enhance maintenance.
- Develop a plan for management of urban wildlife in the downtown (pigeons, rodents, etc.)
- Find out whether efficiencies (cost savings) could be reallocated to enhanced maintenance.

Regarding major maintenance effects on routine maintenance, the major challenges are that major maintenance demands exceed the funding available, resulting in deferred maintenance, and infrastructure conditions have deteriorated on City property to the extent that routine maintenance services can not meet community expectations. (No matter how hard you clean the benches or signs they still don't look good.) Potential strategies to address these challenges include identifying and implementing an ongoing five-year major maintenance program for downtown parks and public spaces.

Regarding Parks capital improvements, the fundamental challenge is that the level of investment in capital improvements for parks and public spaces has not kept pace with the growth of private sector investment in downtown. Downtown park and public space acreage has not kept pace with downtown population growth or projected growth. Park design does not consider strongly enough intended uses, prevention of undesirable uses, or ease of maintenance. Meeting competing community interests and designers' goals often takes priority over practical use and maintenance objectives. Lack of design elements that support commercial activities and the maintenance required for those activities.

Strategies to address these challenges include identifying the intended uses for each park, and:

- Update the parks component of the City's Comprehensive Plan for downtown.
- Identify all public spaces (owned by the government or private business) and incorporate them into a multi-jurisdiction plan to create a network of parks and public spaces.

The objective of these strategies is that downtown parks and public spaces would work as a system to meet the needs of the downtown constituents and visitors.

Task Force Discussion and Questions:

- What is the definition of routine maintenance? Answer: minor facility repairs, cleaning, landscape upkeep.
- The downtown parks need a significant level of reinvestment. The need for major maintenance has an impact on use – lower levels of maintenance translate into less desirable facilities and lower use.
- The level of investment in parks has not kept pace with investments in the rest of the City. Acreage has not kept pace with population and employment growth.
- We need to design our parks for use: function needs to drive form!
- We need the right infrastructure (including power supply) and this hasn't been a design factor historically.
- We need amenities in the parks that will attract women and children – that is a major marker we should be working towards.
- Need to make adjustments to the City's Com Plan regarding downtown parks.
- Look at other cities – Chicago for example. That City has made tremendous capital investments in their parks, and it shows. They have reinvested in their City and have seen dramatic improvements as a result.
- We need to think differently about downtown parks. They need to work as a system.
- We should potentially require other City departments to participate – for economies of scale and to take advantage of adjacency opportunities.

Further Task Force questions/comments:

- Did you get any information on the economic impacts of the surrounding areas? Answer: its been a challenge to get that information. In Portland, the BIA has said that the contiguous businesses have seen direct impacts. There is national information on this, we will search for it.
- There is not enough attention being paid to getting additional park land in downtown.
- An unexamined assumption is that the parks need to be reworked by design. We are going down a path of capital expenditure and that is not totally convincing. A solution to the parks problem is through bringing more people there, by creative enterprises. (This has been done elsewhere.)
- Think about technology as part of the solution. E.g. are there creative ways to bring power to vendor carts, versus a big capital upgrade.
- We need to knit or string the parks together.
- Adopt-a-park too, is worth considering.
- Is there a ratio of parks property for downtown?
- We should bring quasi-public spaces into the discussion, examining how those fit within the system. What are the standards for those spaces? What if we blur the lines somewhat (between public and quasi-public) and implement a mechanism to make it part of a bigger system. There might be a role for the MID to blend some of that public-private opportunity.

We need a public acknowledgement that downtown parks are different! They are really important to the City and for visitors, that is what people see. That is part of how visitors judge our City, by our downtown parks. We need to think of Seattle as a major downtown City and parks are an important element of that mix. We need:

- A master plan for downtown parks, including a funding element. This could be a 5-year plan.
- A Comprehensive Plan update for parks. This year, Citywide, we are updating the 2000 Comp Plan.
- To think further about parks funding. The levy expires in 2008 – what comes after that?
- To stress the need for more people in the parks! People of all kinds should be using the parks. This will help create the sense that the City cares about our parks.
- It is important to separate out the downtown parks from parks in the rest of the City.
- Look at other parks in major cities – e.g. Golden Gate Park. There are vendors there!
- Really look hard at Victor Steinbrueck Park – redesign is going to be important there.

Key Issue #2: Safety and Security Issues

Overview of problem: The public perceives many downtown parks as unsafe during all or part of the day. In particular, the public in Seattle is uncomfortable with park users who exhibit **legal** behaviors. These include: sleeping in the park; shouting; panhandling; being intoxicated; being mildly disorderly; exhibiting signs of mental illness; being homeless and appearing to be living in the park (sleeping bags, blankets, bags with personal belongings, etc.) Strategies to address these challenges include:

- Establish a standard for personal safety for parks and public spaces.
- Develop public and private partnerships to reach and maintain this standard.
- Regularly assess how well the City and partners are meeting the standard.
- Survey representatives from neighborhood and business groups.
- Collect data on incidence of violent crimes in downtown parks and share with stakeholders.
- Increase activities in downtown parks and public spaces.
- Market parks and public spaces as venues for gatherings, and publicize events.
- Try to increase positive media coverage on safety and usability of parks and public spaces.
- Increase presence of uniformed, identifiable staff in parks and public spaces.

- Increase outreach workers in parks and public spaces.
- Increase lighting and reduce obstructive views into parks and public spaces.

The desired outcome is to create an environment where women with children feel safe. Steps to achieve this goal include increasing active uses and programming of parks, and developing pilot programs for commercial activity in downtown parks.

Illegal Activities on Publicly Owned Property -- Discussion

Key issue: the contrast between private property and public property is enormous -- illegal behaviors are allowed on public property. Enforcement of laws does not result in real change.; problems move around downtown. Permanent long-term solutions are expensive and under-funded.

A potential strategy to address this challenge is to establish a consistent standard for enforcement of laws on public and private property, and to try to decrease illegal behaviors in downtown Seattle. This will require additional staff. Another option is to identify corporate sponsor(s) and/or neighborhood associations who are willing to be "official" partners and provide a presence in the parks and public spaces to reclaim the space for all citizens.

The desired outcome is for parks and public spaces to not be sites where illegal behavior is tolerated, and for the City's parks and public spaces are to be used by a diversity of users, where all can feel comfortable. Recommended steps to achieve this objective include:

- Increase SPD presence and enforcement of laws in parks and public spaces.
- Identify opportunities for programs to be sponsored by partners to reclaim the parks for all users.
- Identify partners or sponsors for each park -- sponsor an outreach worker at each site.
- Evaluate the extent of the positive impact on parks and public spaces when increased capacity for day centers (wet and dry) come on line.

Task Force Comments and Discussion

- We need to be mindful of downtown residents – people want and need quiet, contemplative spaces.
- Culturally, people hang out in parks. We need to be mindful that we are a multi-cultural City, and our parks need to be places for conversation and culture.
- Are we looking at any change in the City's definition of "legal behavior"? Portland, for example, just passed a sidewalk sitting ordinance.
- We should have a code of conduct that everyone is welcome in the City's parks, but people need to observe some rules. Just as there is a code of conduct at Safeco Field, for example, there should be a code of conduct for the City's parks. Seattle is at the extreme end of the scale in this regard. And currently, people don't know what is allowed.
- The Washington State Constitution – is that part of the issue? The State's Constitution affords people more rights than the U.S. Constitution.
- Regarding the problems in the parks, we should have a labor-rich solution rather than a design solution. More City staff in the parks, more contracted staff and more volunteers. More people!
- And we should look for ways to enable a contribution from the public, i.e. endowed gardeners.
- There is some ambiguity and difference in interpretation of the Park Code (18.12.27), which says camping is illegal, but doesn't define camping. This could be changed.
- The Parks Exclusion Ordinance – is very useful in helping to enforce behaviors.
- Its important not to mix the roles of maintenance and enforcement.

Next Meeting

The next meeting will take place 8 -10 a.m. on Friday, May 27, in the Boards & Commissions Conference Room on Level 2 at City Hall.